

Public transport strike over subsidies and bus routes

Published on: 20 April 2006 | Author: Debono, Manwel; Farrugia, Christine |

On 28 February 2006, the Public Transport Association resorted to industrial action affecting all bus services, after negotiations with the government and the Malta Transport Authority reached deadlock over reform measures and outstanding subsidies. The strike ended on 3 March 2006 as an agreement on subsidy payment was reached.

The Public Transport Association (Assocazzjoni tat-Trasport Pubbliku, PTA (<http://www.atp.com.mt>)) resorted to industrial action at the end of February after the Ministry for Urban Development and Roads (MUDR (<http://www.mudr.gov.mt>)) and the Malta Transport Authority (Awtorita Dwar it-Trasport ta'Malta, ADT (<http://www.maltatransport.com/en/>)) did not respect a 48-hour ultimatum that PTA had set. Ongoing negotiations reached deadlock in relation to government subsidies that are still due to be paid for 2005 and reform measures concerning route service in public transport. PTA's position was clear that it would call off the industrial action if it received immediate payment of 2005 subsidies and observed a change in the government's bargaining attitude concerning public transport system reforms. At the same time, the government insisted that subsidies granted for 2005 amounted to MTL 1.25 million (€2.9 million) while the transport association asked for MTL 1.3 million (just over €3 million), which represents a difference of MTL 50,000 (approximately €117,000).

During the strike, the government provided an emergency bus service, first to Malta's general hospital and, then, with the support of the armed forces and the police, to two major higher secondary colleges. Initially, the government intended to firmly maintain its position without succumbing to PTA's demands. Yet, during a meeting on 1 March, the government and PTA reached an agreement on subsidies while the industrial action continued until the next day. Subsequent meetings between the parties remained inconclusive with regard to the government's reform proposals to introduce nine groups of bus routes, with each route group having a fixed number of buses and drivers allocated to it. The government proposals follow the €1 million budget limit set by the European Commission; exceeding this would have meant having to discontinue the current open tender system.

The bus strike also affected the transport service for the country's schools, especially secondary schools. The government urged parents to ensure that their children continued to attend school. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Employment filed a judicial protest against PTA, accusing it of breaching its agreement with the ministry by failing to provide transport for national school students. The agreement clearly states

that PTA is obliged to give a 10-day notice before stopping its school transport service, or pay a double fine.

The Malta Labour Party (MLP (<http://www.mlp.org.mt>)), which is currently in opposition, stated that the number of public transport users was declining, and held the government responsible for being unable to reform the public transport system as promised before the election (**MT0509102N** ([//www.eurofound.europa.eu/ef/observatories/eurwork/articles/deadlock-between-government-and-public-transport-association-leads-to-industrial-action](http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ef/observatories/eurwork/articles/deadlock-between-government-and-public-transport-association-leads-to-industrial-action))).

Public transport returned to normal on 3 March following a ballot in which bus drivers and members of the PTA unanimously accepted almost all of the government's proposals. The strike was then called off. The government offered an immediate payment of the undisputed 2005 subsidies and, from March onwards, a monthly transfer of MTL 75,000 (€175,000) as part of this year's subsidies. The transport association, thus, yielded the outstanding MTL 50,000 (€117,000) from 2005. As for the planned reform, the ministry proposed a rotating system whereby bus drivers would not cover the same route all the time.

Manwel Debono, Centre for Labour Studies, University of Malta